

The Frontiers of Being Human

The Politics of Experience, by R. D. Laing (Pantheon, 138 pp. \$4.95), questions the theory that the schizophrenic must be helped to adapt to society: "Adaptation to what? To a mad world?" Dr. Rollo May is a supervisory and training analyst of the William Alanson White Institute of Psychiatry, Psychoanalysis and Psychology. Among his half-dozen books are "Man's Search for Himself" and "Existence: A New Dimension in Psychiatry and Psychology." His "Love and Will" will be published next fall.

By ROLLO MAY

ARGUING in this book that psychotherapy does not need to become a pseudo-esoteric cult, Ronald Laing writes:

We must continue to struggle through our confusion, to insist on being human. Existence is a flame which constantly melts and recasts our theories. . . . We hope to share the experience of a relationship, but the only honest beginning, or even end, may be to share the experience of its absence.

That the whole field of psychotherapy has been and is now in confusion no one can doubt. All over the country one is being asked, "Is psychoanalysis dead? Is Freud dead?" Generally the question arises from the same faddist, dogmatizing sort of thinking that led some people to make Freud a god who could do no wrong, and their particular brand of psychotherapy a catechism that was guaranteed to save us from our human agony and struggle. At the same time, different kinds of therapy have continued to appear—family therapy, behavior therapy, marathon group therapy, Gestalt and transactional therapy, etc. However, the studies of the results of therapy seem so often to be based on the externalistic question of how the individual "adjusts" to our alienated society that their "proofs" that therapy does or does not do any good strike one as being curiously irrelevant.

In this confusion everyone tends to forget the real issue: that human beings do change, for good or ill. They are born, live, work, suffer travail, sometimes achieve a measure of love and meaning—and die. Order could come out of the

confusion if we kept our minds on the question, what does it mean to be human? The directness and single-minded honesty with which Ronald Laing asked this question in his recent lectures in New York as the Visiting Distinguished Psychoanalyst, under the auspices of the William Alanson White Institute, are what make the present book so refreshing and compelling.

Laing, by training a psychiatrist, represents a creative synthesis of a number of significant streams in the psychotherapeutic field. He is an associate member of the British Psychoanalytic Society and principal investigator of the Schizophrenia and Family Research Unit at the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in London. Closely associated with American anthropologists like Gregory Bateson and Jules Henry, he is also concerned with contemporary sociology,

and has played a central role in the significant recent research on family therapy, reported in a previous book, *The Families of Schizophrenics*. Laing, moreover, is thoroughly grounded in modern existential and phenomenological thought; thus he knows how critically important it is for the therapist to clarify his own philosophical assumptions. And not least important, he is of that rare breed in which the scientist and artist dwell in the same skin: the last fifteen pages of this book consist of a long prose-poem of Laing entitled "The Bird of Paradise."

"A revolution is currently going on in relation to sanity and madness, both inside and outside psychiatry," Laing writes as a kind of theme for this book. "The clinical point of view is giving way before a point of view that is both existential and social." We are, he believes, in the midst of a shift in approach no less radical than that three centuries ago from the demonological to the clinical. When mental disturbances were classified as illnesses a concerted endeavor was made to find in schizophrenic behavior certain symptoms and signs of a disease of unknown origin, presumed to be largely genetic-constitutionally determined. What actually

Your Literary I. Q.

Conducted by John T. Winterich and David M. Glixon

T O M - T O M S

Thinking that other SR readers might like to share their tomfoolery, Tom and Mary Hopkins of Seattle ask you to fill in the names that identify the famous Thomases who are described below in alphabetical order. Doubting Toms may peep at the register on page 43.

1. Tom _____ wrote the *Summa Theologica*.
2. Tom _____ was Archbishop of Canterbury.
3. Tom _____ was a frightfully squeamish editor.
4. Tom _____ wrote ornately about a doctor's religion.
5. Tom _____ was an addict of dope and style.
6. Tom _____ was an English poet from St. Louis.
7. Tom _____ was a grave poet.
8. Tom _____ drafted our most important political document.
9. Tom _____ wrote the *Imitation of Christ*.
10. Tom _____ wrote about a circular royal table and those who sat thereat.
11. Tom _____ was an erudite novelist of the bourgeois vs. the spiritual.
12. Tom _____ wrote poems about Irish harps.
13. Tom _____ was Lord Chancellor to Henry VIII.
14. Tom _____ called himself "Citizen."
15. Tom _____ wrote lengthy autobiographical novels about Eugene and George.

happened, by and large, was that the patient was adjudged "psychotic" if he could not adjust to society's requirements.

We are now, Laing states, in the third stage, in which it is seen that schizophrenia is a strategy, a necessary way the person must pick to survive in an alienated world.

In over 100 cases where we studied the actual circumstances around the social event when one person comes to be regarded as schizophrenic, it seems to us that *without exception* the experience and behavior that gets labeled schizophrenic is a special strategy that a person invents in order to live in an unlivable situation.

Psychiatrists and psychologists who maintain that schizophrenia is pathology show much resistance to Laing's position. But he cites the research of Bateson—based on the important double-bind theory—and the new studies of the families of schizophrenics at Yale, at Palo Alto, at the National Institute of Mental Health, as well as his own research. "In all these places, to the best of my knowledge, no schizophrenic has been studied whose disturbed pattern of communication has not been shown to be a reflection of, and reaction to, the disturbed and disturbing pattern characterizing his or her family of origin."

What is refreshing and exciting in

Laing is not his glorification of the irrational—of which he is sometimes accused by psychiatrists and psychologists who preach adaptation—but his frank challenge: "Adaptation to what? To society? To a mad world?" To Laing the height of irrationality is adjusting to what is called "normal"—to a world of Vietnam, a world in which cities not only poison their citizens physically through air pollution but shrink the individual's consciousness, a world in which "machines are already becoming better at communicating with each other than human beings with human beings. The situation is ironical. More and more concern about communication, less and less to communicate."

Laing's constructive contribution has been to blend the interpersonal theory of Harry Stack Sullivan with an existential, phenomenological foundation. These two go together, asserts Laing: the only way we can understand and deal with human beings is to clarify the "nature of being human"—which is ontology. "Any theory not founded on the nature of being human is a lie and a betrayal of man." And such a theory will have, to the extent the therapist is consistent, inhuman consequences. He believes that a fundamental source of our confusion in psychology and psychiatry is the "failure to realize that there is an ontological discontinuity between human beings and it-beings." Here

Laing is in accord with Martin Buber's theory that psychoanalysis always tends to transform the "I" into an "it."

Though Laing appreciates Freud more deeply than many who make a dogma of the master's teachings, he holds that we must frankly face the fact that Freud thought and wrote in an alienated age and to some extent is himself an expression of this alienation. "The metapsychology of Freud, Federn, Rapaport, Hartman, Kris, has no constructs for any social system generated by more than one person at a time. . . . This theory has no category of 'you' . . . no concept of 'me' except as objectified as 'the ego.'" But it is precisely the function of psychotherapy to "remain an obstinate attempt of two people to recover the wholeness of being human through the relationship between them."

We need a form of psychology that does not dwell on behavior to the exclusion of experience or experience without regard for behavior, but centers on the relation between experience and behavior.

Laing is aware of the widespread emphasis in our day, particularly in America, on studying the individual solely in terms of his behavior. Yet to the extent that we do so, we lose the person, for the human being is characterized by both inner experience and outer behavior, and the critical point is the relation between the two. Of this, comments Laing, "natural science knows nothing." A new method is required, one he calls social phenomenology.

We are a generation of men so estranged from the inner world that many are arguing that it does not exist; and that even if it does exist, it does not matter. . . . Quantify the heart's agony and ecstasy in a world in which the inner world is first discovered, we are liable to find ourselves bereft and derelict. For without the inner the outer loses its meaning, and without the outer the inner loses its substance.

Laing's own sincerity gives his words a compelling power. Although with his convictions it is natural that he would find himself ranged on a number of battlelines, his chief fight is with the organicists. In Laing's opinion the severe social disturbance the schizophrenic is enduring provokes the biochemical changes in his body. But he discerns no conclusive evidence as yet that there are the organic bases for such "difficulties in living," as Sullivan called them.

Also ranged against the behavior therapists, Laing charges that "behavior therapy is the most extreme example of schizoid theory and practice," proposing "to think and act purely in terms of the other without reference to the self of the therapist or the patient. . . . It is inevitably therefore a technique of non-meeting, of manipulation and control."

Laing's work is also to be distin-



H. Martin

"Come on! We're going over to Stew's house to hear tapes of his parents' arguments."